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## **Building a history of citizen photography: the TAFOS Story**

### **Abstract**

From 1986-98, over the years of Peru's bloody internal conflict, Talleres de Fotografía Social (TAFOS) armed over 270 Peruvians from 30 communities – campesinos, miners, Afro-Peruvians, youth, men and women in the barrios – with cameras. Defining itself as being born out of the people's need 'to recover their own image', TAFOS photographers documented daily life, working conditions, political upheaval and grassroots mobilization during a turbulent period of Peruvian history. TAFOS created a visual memory gathered by the very people that lived it that has become part of the visual social make-up of Peru society.

The TAFOS photographers were doing citizens journalism before the term was coined. Sketching a potential history, this article tells the story of TAFOS. It represents it as a forerunner to contemporary developments in citizen and participatory photography and argues its significance as a counter archive of photographic history. The TAFOS experience pushes contemporary visual practitioners to examine the criteria by which they devise and articulate socially engaged projects. Its narrative challenges the tendency to mythologize photography's capacity to empower and enable social change by insisting that people and politics, not just photography, lay at its core.

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## Building a history of citizen photography: The TAFOS Story

TAFOS (*Los Talleres de Fotografía Social*) was a landmark project and a pioneer of grassroots photographic activism. While established within Latin American photographic histories<sup>1</sup>, it has been little documented in the English language. Running from 1986-1998 over the years of Peru's bloody internal conflict, the project armed a network of over 270 community photographers from 30 communities across the country with cameras. Defining itself as being born out of the people's need 'to recover their own image' (TAFOS 2006:6), TAFOS photographers documented daily life during a turbulent period of Peruvian history and created a 'visual memory gathered by the very people that lived it' (Pastor 2007:1). Its archive has become part of the 'visual social makeup' of Peru (Falconi quoted in Fairey 2015a:198) and for some of the photographers it was an enduring, life-shaping experience, the effects of which they feel to this day (Fairey 2017b).

This article re-counts the story of TAFOS. It argues its importance within a history of 'horizontal photography' (Azoulay 2014) and as a counter archive of Peruvian history. At a point where contemporary socially engaged photographic practice is marked by a renewed interest in the collaborative, participatory and community aspects of photography I propose that TAFOS is an important forbear and that its story can both inform and orientate contemporary participatory visual practice.

The TAFOS photographers did citizen photography and journalism before the terms were coined. There is a tendency to treat the recent rapid rises in image production, sharing and circulation as something unique to the digital era, intimately connected to digital technology and the spread of social media. However digital culture and technology have not spawned new phenomena but rather accelerated and amplified behaviors and cultural components that are 'pervasive and historical' (Deuze 2006:64). Möller highlights how contemporary citizen photographers use digital cameras to question power and exert political agency, sketching a new landscape of what is possible (2010). The story of TAFOS illustrates how photography created the conditions for shared space long before it went digital. Developments that seem contemporary – civil visual activism, participatory, collaborative and collective visual production, interaction and sharing - were in fact characteristics embodied in photography from the outset.

The democratic character of photography has long been lauded however photographic history and literature has defined the medium through vertical narratives about the great (male), hero photographers, their singular gazes and iconic images. There has been scant focus on the civil use of photography, where the camera is actively harnessed 'to reimagine relations among individuals and between them and the world' (Azoulay 2014:25). Such forms of 'horizontal' photography (Azoulay 2014) are becoming increasingly widespread but they are not unprecedented.

The story of TAFOS is offered as a vibrant moment in a 'potential history' (Azoulay 2014) of grassroots photographic activism. The notion of 'potential history' is key to a new political imaginary of photography in which photography is a civil practice

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<sup>1</sup> TAFOS is often featured in Latin American photography anthologies such as Testino (2007), Billeter (2007) Castellote (2007).

conducted not just as a 'picture-hunt' but as a multi-participated activity (2014:33). Writing a 'potential history' is the work of interfering in historical narratives and reviving as active materials that which might have been repressed, removed or overlooked (Azoulay 2014). TAFOS exemplifies one of many moments in photography's history where photography has been used as a form of civil resistance, where people have laid claim to their right to the camera, creating, working with, archiving and sharing images; using photography as a form of being together as well as transmission (Azoulay 2012). In TAFOS authorial control was assigned to the collective. It was an enterprise driven by a community seeking to re-assert itself, supported by people from outside of that community but not controlled by them.

When the TAFOS experience is weaved together with other overlooked fragments and lost chapters of photographic history, such as the UK community photography scene and The Worker Photography Movement (Ribalta 2011) it is possible to trace a 'potential' history of civil photographic activism that grounds and provides a history for contemporary practice (Fairey 2015a). While few of these archives have entered the hallowed histories of photography's greats, their stories and images shed light on 'photography's other histories' and contribute to a vital historical account of photography as a 'globally disseminated and locally appropriated medium' self-fashioned by its users (Pinney & Petersen 2003:1).

Drawing on doctoral research in Peru with former TAFOS photographers and staff and in the TAFOS archive, this article relays the TAFOS story for English speaking audiences. The bulk of the essay will provide a descriptive account of TAFOS. In the final part I will discuss TAFOS's ethos and articulation of photography as a tool to enable social change.

This essay engages in retrospective research that looks back in order to look forward. The contemporary spectrum of collaborative, participatory and community based photographic practice is diverse, fragmented and inconsistent with its approach to, definitions of and frameworks for participatory visual practice (Chalfern 2012). Ranging from socially engaged, collaborative artistic practice (Palmer 2017), citizen journalism and photography, community photography work (de Cuyper 1997), participatory visual social research methods (De Lange et al 2008, Lutrell and Chalfen 2010) and specific applications such as photovoice (Wang 1999) and auto-photography, its applications are simultaneously informed by plural theoretical approaches and disciplines. A common narrative underlines this unwieldy diversity: a narrative that romanticizes photography capacity to empower, to challenge dominant hierarchies and enable positive social change. The danger of this narrative is that it overly simplifies practice and focuses attention onto the medium of photography itself rather than on the people and politics that shape it. The TAFOS story directs our attention to questions that remain salient to this day. Who owns and leads these initiatives? How should collaborative and collective photography endeavors be organized and managed? What happens to these projects and the images that they generate? How do we define their success and significance?

The aim here is not to wistfully romanticize an imagined history of grassroots photographic activism. Rather it is to contribute to building a more complex narrative of civil photography that helps practitioners to reflect on contemporary practice and

the politics of aesthetics, representation, ethics and power in which it is embedded (Faurey 2017b).

Over thirty years ago Kelly argued that the failure to develop thinking, theory and frameworks in community arts lead to the sector's co-optation in the UK (1983). His point remains pertinent to the contemporary field of socially engaged and participatory photographic practice where there is an ongoing lack of critical discussion and a pressing need to examine the criteria by which socially engaged projects are articulated and judged (Bishop 2012). Current debates are exemplified by polarized positions (Charnley 2011) that on one side argue that projects should be evaluated as social interactions, on the quality of the ethical and dialogical opportunities they create (Kester 2004) and those who believe that the focus should be at how they work of as art, that the political and critical potential of projects lie in their aesthetic rather than ethical achievements (Bishop 2006).

The story of TAFOS, as re-told here, demonstrates how the political potency of these projects lies not in one or the other but, rather, in both their ethics and their aesthetics. The grassroots, horizontal politics and ethos that drove and shaped TAFOS combined with the aesthetic urgency and visual impact and legacy of its images defined its success and achievements. TAFOS illustrates how ethics and aesthetics are not mutually exclusive but rather can be harnessed alongside each other to augment and expand the critical potential of photography as a tool and catalyst for activism and change (Figure 1).

### **The beginning of TAFOS**

*'It all started in 1986, when Gregorio Condori asked to borrow a camera.'* (Thomas Müller in TAFOS 2006:20)

Gregorio Condori, a campesino leader had seen the photographers, Thomas and Helga Müller, working around Ocongate, a small highland community near Cusco where he lived. The German couple who had been based in Peru for a number of years, were working with Jesuit priests in the village on a community development project. Condori needed the camera because he needed proof. A judge was demanding a high-bred alpaca as a bribe to ensure the ruling in a litigation case came out favorably for the community. With the borrowed camera he took a picture of the judge with his alpaca and went to Cusco to file an official complaint.

On his return, Condori and Thomas Müller put a proposal to the Ocongate Committee of Human Rights to run some photography workshops. It was suggested that the local committee chose some of their members who could act as community photographers. Müller would show them how to use a camera. This group became the first workshop of what was to be called *Los Talleres de Fotografía Social* (Figure 2).

From 1986 until its closure in 1998, TAFOS ran almost thirty photography workshops with communities in 8 districts across Peru; from campesino collectives to miners associations, from women and youth in city slums to Afro-Peruvian communities on the coast. These grassroots 'social' photographers shot over 4200 rolls of film and

produced over 150,000 images<sup>2</sup> that continue to be exhibited and distributed to this day.

But at the outset, there were no such grand plans. It started organically, in response, says Müller, to a demand from those who participated. This he believes is key to understanding it all.

*“To have meaning (these projects) need to arise from a need felt by the people who are going to take the pictures. This gives it meaning not only because the impact afterwards is greater but also because the images are better. In TAFOS images you see pictures that are very impactful, naive, powerful, almost coming from a perspective of rebirth, and this is because people were very clear in their minds what they wanted to say. They had a deep felt need to communicate, to leave the isolation in their minds, in their forests, in their barrios and to say, ‘Carajo, this is me and I am proud of it. I do not want to be manipulated.’” (T.Müller, 2011, interview, 3 June)*

For Condori, the camera was a tool he could use to denounce, to speak up against corruption in his village. For many of the TAFOS photographers who followed photography fulfilled a similar function. It provided them with a way to document and decry, to explain and protest, defend and highlight the conditions in which they were living.

### **The context**

Talk to anyone involved in TAFOS and they all insist that to understand the project you have to understand the context out of which it grew. Economic collapse meant the large majority of the country from the isolated indigenous communities in the mountains to the swelling barrios of the large cities, were living in dire and precarious circumstances. Political corruption, violence, hyperinflation, crime, a dramatic fall in real wages and spiraling debt led people to call this period the ‘Lost Decade of the 80s’ (Starn et al 2005:440). The numbers of people living in poverty exploded. Huge numbers of campesinos migrated to the cities looking to build new lives away from the harsh rural subsistence existence but found the urban centres to be no less unforgiving (Figure 3).

As the economic crisis deepened and peoples discontent with traditional party politics grew, the Communist Party of Peru, better known as Sendero or The Shining Path, started to wage their revolutionary assault on the Peruvian state. It was to become one of the bloodiest and most violent internal conflicts in Latin American during the late twentieth century. Led by philosophy professor, Abimael Guzmán, who inspired religious devotion in his followers, the Sendero advocated a Maoist class based Marxism with armed revolution as its central force. Driven by a fierce sense of destiny, the movement called for the destruction of the state and the building of a Maoist utopia in its place. Shining Path rebels would stop at nothing in order to further the revolution. Their tactics ranged from bombing to kidnap, torture, rape, murder, massacre and intimidation.

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<sup>2</sup> Statistics taken from Llosa 2006: 34



Most Peruvians, of all backgrounds, rejected the violent authoritarianism of the Shining Path. Their terror tactics however drastically affected the lives of the many people, who were already living hand to mouth existences in the isolated indigenous rural Andean communities where much of the violence was waged. Guerillas closed markets; people with any ties to the state were murdered along with anyone who displayed any kind of dissent or protest. Public executions were carried out and hostile villages attacked (Figure 4).

From 1983-85 the emergency zones had grown from nine to twenty seven provinces and the government initiated a fierce response. Security forces used 'disappearances' to instill fear and, much as their adversaries, employed murder, rape and intimidation in their quest to eliminate the rebels. Army sweeps would destroy and upturn communities. Campesino communities found themselves stuck in the middle of two lethal forces with violence escalating as they retaliated and counter-retaliated against each other<sup>3</sup>.

Against this backdrop of severe insecurity and economic hardship ordinary people came together to organize and defend themselves. From the 1970s onwards there was a sharp growth in the popular movement in Peru. The numbers of community based committees, NGOs and progressive church led organisations, working to attend the needs of the working population that the State were not meeting, grew significantly. As the crisis deepened new forms of grassroots social mobilization sprouted up. Soup kitchens, peasant patrols, mother's clubs, youth groups, unions, agrarian leagues, community associations and 'Vaso de Leche'<sup>4</sup> committees created a bottom-up support network and lifelines for many of the population struggling to keep their heads above water. Starn notes that 'the tremendous ability to organize in the face of what appeared to be certain defeat was surely the decade's greatest achievement' (2005:441).

It was within this web of grassroots initiatives that TAFOS found its place and *raison d'être*. From these organisations there was a clear necessity to be able to communicate to those near and far but they lacked the tools to get their messages across. 'The language of photography became a hinge and a bridge' for the organisations (Müller in TAFOS 2006:22) who rapidly caught on to its huge possibilities (Larrea 1989).

Photography enabled a process of 'autoreconocimiento', of self-recognition, for those involved (Llosa in TAFOS 2006:40). It fulfilled a dual role, to reflect on and re-build identity and to speak out to those outside (Müller in TAFOS 2006:22). Annie Bungeroth, a British photographer who worked at TAFOS from 1989-93, recalls "there was that need to work on the self-respect and the strength of people, to build some sense of their own value so they could defend themselves against the terrorism of the Sendero on one side and the counter-terrorism from the military on the other" (A. Bungeroth, 2011, interview, 1 Feb). Photography thus also became a way to

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<sup>3</sup> The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission established to investigate abuses committed during this bloody period of conflict put the death toll at 69,280. Their report revealed that the Shining Path were responsible for 46% of the deaths, with the government security forces killing roughly a third. It was the indigenous communities that disproportionately suffered. A revealing statistic was that 75% of the victims who were killed or disappeared spoke Quechua as their native language despite the fact that the 1993 census found that only 20% of the population speak Quechua or other indigenous languages as their native language (CVR 2004).

<sup>4</sup> 'Vaso de Leche', 'Glass of Milk' was a feeding programme aimed at reducing malnourishment

explore the familiar details of their lives, to celebrate their culture, commemorate their values and traditions and reaffirm their identity (Figure 5).

TAFOS themselves defined their cause in this passage:

*'One of the ways to create a new social order in a fragmented country is for the people to re-build their image, their face, their words ...this work must be carried out by the popular sectors of society and must assume an indispensable part of their fight for survival and even more so for their right to be protagonists and directors in the life of the country ... It was out of this drama and the need to recover their own image that the TAFOS project rose... This is what gives it meaning and direction... we believe that with this confrontation we are playing today for the future of the country. In this context photography is not an end but a means: of local, sectorial and national identification, a means to denounce on the one hand and a weapon for ideological confrontation and for recovering the right to identity and difference on the other' (TAFOS blurb quoted in Llosa in TAFOS 2006:39, originally from TAFOS Proyecto Trienal 1991-93)*

## The rise and spread of TAFOS

The workshops in Ocongate sowed the seed. The Müllers soon instigated a second pilot workshop in the barrio of El Agustino in Lima and by the end of 1987 there were 39 social photographers working with 20 cameras organizing localised exhibitions and wall newspapers. Their work started to generate attention, winning a regional award and being published in *Caretas*, a respected Peruvian weekly news magazine. Having initially surviving on small donations, funding started to come in from international donors and development agencies<sup>5</sup> keen to underwrite the costs of TAFOS's workshops, offices and dissemination activities.

In 1990 it was decided that TAFOS should register officially as a non-profit. With offices in Lima and Cusco, a management team, supported by a board, made all key decisions although the importance of internal democracy was insisted upon. The lab, archive, dissemination and regional offices made up sub-teams and the wider group would meet annually to plan the year's work. Much of the team was made up of the facilitators who went out to support the workshops. They included people with and without photographic expertise; the focus was on how they engaged with others rather than on their track record as photographers. For Müller, it was "enough that we get to know where this person's heart lies, the rest can be learnt" (quoted in Pastor 2007:2-3).

The Lima office became a meeting place where people congregated to used the darkrooms and catch up on what was happening. Twenty years later, former TAFOS photographers and staff talk with conviction about the TAFOS 'family', the

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<sup>5</sup> Over the years these included Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED), Brücke der Bruderhilfe Switzerland, Evangelisches Missionswerk Germany, Schweizer Missionsgesellschaft Bethlehem Switzerland, Fastenopfer der Schweizer Katholiken Switzerland, Lutheran World Relief de Estados Unidos, Oxfam and Christian Aid.



camaraderie and the significance of the relationships made. Gloria Calderon, a photographer in the El Agustino workshop, remarked that the relationships she formed have helped her through the hardest times of her lives, "the value of these friendships to me have been huge, they don't have a price" (G.Calderon, 2011, interview, 4 June). Juan Carlos, a TAFOS facilitator, re-iterates her sentiment, "I think friendship is basic for a project like TAFOS." (JC.Paucar, 2011, interview, 5 June). The real political ground of the collaborative and participatory work in TAFOS lay in these relationships and the quality of dialogue that happened between all the different TAFOS stakeholders (Kester 2004).

1991 marked the peak of TAFOS's activity. Its team had swelled significantly to 30 members, their frenetic activities following 'the agitated rhythm of that era' (Müller in TAFOS 2006:27). There were a total of fourteen workshops and hundreds of 'acciones de difusion' (dissemination actions). The project's reach was broad. Its presence was felt on a localized, national and international level.

Dissemination was happening principally through two channels. The local organisations and workshops would focus on localised, regional and sometimes national circulation and then the central TAFOS team would focus on dissemination through channels at national and international level. TAFOS featured on the pages of many international publications including *Der Spiegel* and *Geo* in Germany, *el Pais* and *Cambio 16* in Spain, *The New York Times* and *Time* in the USA, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* in the UK. The project built a name within photography circles winning a coveted Mother Jones award and within NGO and development circles, with UNESCO naming TAFOS as a constituent part of the Decade of Education and Communication (1987-1996).

The photographers and their organisations were prolific and inventive with how they used their images, often free of conventions about how images should and should not be displayed. Exhibitions, from formal to makeshift, were held anywhere that was possible - on walls, in the streets, in market places, at conventions, community meetings and cultural events. Collections of pictures would be produced, shared and laid out on the floors of plazas, in offices and in the middle of the path as people stopped and talked (Figure 6). Images were held aloft as people marched and demonstrated (Figure 7), they were incorporated into wall newspapers (Figure 8), made in to flyers and posters. Mobile exhibitions would be created on carts that could be pushed around at public spaces and gatherings (Figure 9).

Galleries and universities in Peru's cities hosted more formal, traditional exhibitions creating a considerable audience amongst Peru's middle classes, its creative scene and intellectuals. Exhibitions were opportunities to agitate and protest, through the images and their messages. The photographers of the San Marcos workshop in Lima held one such exhibition in 1989. The focus of their work had been human rights and they were determined to present to the people of Lima the victims of the conflict and the atrocities committed in the Andean villages far from the capital. The walls of the university had become a battleground between the Sendero, the MRTA, the left and rightist organizations. Political posters and graffiti covered the walls, each side denouncing the other. The TAFOS photographers chose this space to paste their images, of victims and atrocities committed by both sides, and in doing took a shot at

the political groups who did not dare to deface the photographs that brought home the reality of the violence taking place in the mountains far from the capital.

International exhibitions sought to maintain the ethos of the collectivism and activism in which TAFOS was rooted. For the 1991 exhibition in London's Photographer's Gallery all the TAFOS members inputted into the show's direction, curation, edit and catalogue (Figure 10). David Chandler wrote in the exhibition catalogue,

*'The means to control images, to take charge of the form and function of photography has perhaps never been more significant or widely coveted. In this context, the work of TAFOS is an important initiative, when seen also against the background of years of oppression and misrepresentation, it is a vital show of resistance in what remains a constant struggle for survival... It is powerful but purposeful work, not merely an alternative expression but an integral part of an unfolding social process.'* (The Photographers Gallery 1991:5)

### The workshops

There was huge diversity within the 27 TAFOS workshops. Records of the numbers of films taken in each workshop reveal that some were much more prolific and active than others<sup>6</sup>. Some ran over years, others over months. Group sizes varied from just two to twenty eight photographers. Despite the differences, they were based on a similar methodology and logistical framework.

The local organization recruited the photographers from among their members. Often the workshops were made up of people of various different organisations that were all associated with a centralized body. In this way they became places where activists that shared common interests came together. The images were then used not only by the local organization but also by the central body giving them a regional and sometimes national, as well as local, audience.

Most of the TAFOS photographers had never laid their hands on a camera before. They would work initially with small automatic cameras (Yashicas T3s or Nikon L35AF) that could be mastered quickly and bypassed the need for any lengthy technical training. The facilitators used intuitive teaching styles rather than any curriculum. They saw their role as one of support. The priority was for the photographers to take charge of their own photography; the workshops were 'primarily a space for analysis, debate and collective judgment, where a photographer nurtures something much more important than good technique: ideas, objectives, projects' (Larrea 1989).

Paucar, a TAFOS facilitator, spoke of the importance of TAFOS's responsiveness to how the community photographers wanted to use photography.

*"In these kinds of project you need to be very flexible, working with photography you need to be even more so. Because you never know what the result of the pictures will be, you don't know what will be in the photos, you don't know in what space they will be seen ... In the case of TAFOS this was*

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<sup>6</sup> Available in TAFOS 2006 and Fairey 2015a.

*one of our greatest strengths, we were able to be flexible... We had the capacity to be receptive. When you go somewhere you cannot impose you have to be open. If not you lose many valuable things... Photographers would come and ask us – can we do this, can we take school pictures etc etc. We would think, great – you are finding another use for the photos, great ...we would listen, we would never say no no no... If they found an extra use for the photography then great, we could aggregate the value of what we were doing. It is like going to a shop and asking for a packet of biscuits and being given two. It is like a present, this learning and we accepted it gratefully". (JC.Paucar, 2011, interview, 5 June)*

The workshop participants managed themselves and made their own decisions on subject matter and editorial choices. Photographers would meet on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to look over the pictures that had been taken, discuss and debate their images, plan dissemination activities and respond to requests that they had had to photograph one thing or another.

TAFOS photographers shot almost exclusively in black and white and the developing of films and the making of prints was all done by hand in order to maintain professional standards and keep costs down. Their ways of working seem 'almost artisan' now (Llosa in TAFOS 2006:41) however TAFOS' handling and supervision of the production process enabled them to retain their autonomy. Films would be taken by facilitators to be developed in TAFOS labs and then contact sheets and work prints would be brought back to communities the following month. Print orders were made each month or people could visit TAFOS offices to make larger selections for an exhibition.

### **The camera as a weapon**

During TAFOS's initial years the expansion of workshops in the Southern Andes coincided with the strengthening of the campesino associations in Puno as the Shining Path penetrated the zone. From 1988-1990, with the workshops in Yanaoca and Espinar in the Cusco highlands and then the Pucara and Juliaca workshops in the hills around Puno, TAFOS had a presence that extended across the area where the Shining Path were competing for leadership of the campesino communities. The pictures produced during these workshops reflect the militancy of the times (Figure 11). Müller writes respectfully of the photographer's efforts,

*"Many of the community leaders as photographers went around armed with pictures and were always ready to make any moment into an opportunity to show them. In the community meetings, they circulated images of the murdered community leaders such as Tomas Quispesayhua and Porfirio Suni... At times when a public exhibition was not possible due to the particularly deadly cocktail of Shining Path and Army, the photographers would take a set of pocket sized pictures out of their hats and discuss them with the people present. It was admirable how they fought with the camera and photograph in their hands..." (Müller in TAFOS 2006:26)*

The Shining Path were themselves aware of TAFOS's work. They even gave them a tacit approval when, in response to a 1989 TAFOS group exhibition<sup>7</sup>, they released the comment that the images were 'born of the gun and not of bourgeois revisionism' (TAFOS 2006:24).

At the TAFOS offices security was taken seriously due to the potential risk that either the Sendero or military might come looking to retrieve or destroy the negatives. Many films were destroyed when troops were passing through the areas where TAFOS photographers were active. With TAFOS photographers denouncing the violence and fearing reprisals, their safety was given the highest priority. Many films were destroyed. Justo Vargas, then co-ordinator of the Cusco office, recalls that the safety of the photographers always came first (J.Vargas, 2011, interview, 2 June).

In conversation with TAFOS photographers the potency of what they saw as the power of the image to assert themselves and their rights is palpable. There is the story of the woman in a barrio in Cusco who was having a problem with the rubbish truck dumping its load behind her house. That was, until she got her camera out and started taking pictures. The truck never came back (J.Vargas, 2011, interview, 2 June). And then there was the campesino woman and her daughter who were being photographed by tourists while they worked in the fields. She delighted in their shock when she got out her camera and started taking pictures of them. (T. Müller, 2011, interview, 3 June).

In the Morococha y La Oroya workshops TAFOS's activities were directly tied to the miner's and mining trade unions movement to expose bad working conditions and to fight the practice of 'selling your health' - the acceptance of small wage increases in exchange for working in unacceptable conditions (Müller in TAFOS 2006:28). The photographers however faced huge problems as the mines had been militarized. Leaders were threatened and murdered by the Shining Path and paramilitaries. Soldiers and private agents closely monitored miners' activities and they were unable to photograph and document the inhuman conditions inside the mines.

However an unexpected turn of events changed things. The Ministry of Energy and Mines, when re-negotiating the national tender, overlooked the paragraph that related to the photography workshops and unintentionally authorized that the unions could have a photographer in the mines (Figure 12). As a result, the officials had to grudgingly accept the presence of the camera. Despite this, whenever there was an accident the supervisors would hunt out the films. These would be passed hand-to-hand through the tunnels to avoid destruction by the security men.

### **The winding down of the workshops**

In 1990, Alberto Fujimori was elected as Peru's president. His record was to be "mixed and controversial" (Starn et al 2005:481). While his neo-liberal free market economics brought hyperinflation under control, unemployment spiraled and record levels of poverty were recorded. In 1992 Fujimori assumed quasi-dictatorial powers in a bloodless coup that saw the suspension of the constitution, the abolition of Congress, regional governments and judicial power. He believed only authoritarian

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<sup>7</sup> 'Mirrors with Memory' held at San Marcos University in Lima, a hub of Sendero activity

rule and drastic measures would prevent economic collapse and a Shining Path victory. Refusing to punish human rights abuses, he restricted due judicial processes, concentrated power into the hands of the executive and banned public meetings. Popular groups were practically dismantled by his anti-terrorism legislation.

Fujimori's policies were not only abrupt 'but decisive for projects like TAFOS' (Llosa in TAFOS 2006:41). Extreme neoliberal policies, popular patronage used by the Fujimori regime, the militarization of a large part of the civil population in the countryside and new labor legislation left little space for the work of the unions and collectives that had been active previously. Growing political violence prevented the free functioning of community organisations with leaders being threatened and murdered.

In addition there was a broader move that discredited socialism and the politics of the left, the ideological fuel of both the grassroots organisations and TAFOS. The issue was not just external, an internal document<sup>8</sup> reflected that 'the majority of the team believed in the viability of TAFOS, but without believing at the same time in the work that underlined its foundation: socialism and the popular movement' (cited in Llosa 1996:10). The political vision that had sustained the workshops and organisations was disintegrating.

The changing political landscape reduced the demand for workshops on the part of the organisations who could no longer sustain or take charge of them (Llosa 1996:7). From 1993 TAFOS began to systematize its ways of working, delivering pre-planned initiatives with set timeframes and outcomes using project models that resemble many contemporary NGO-linked participatory photography projects (Fairey 2015a). The work was less politicized but it still continued to build 'the longed for wider image of Peru' (Müller in TAFOS 2006:32) with workshops in the jungle (Figure 13) and with Afro Peruvian communities being added to the TAFOS portfolio. The rhetoric and the ideological framework shifted away from a championing of the popular movement to centre around the desire for a free, just and democratic society for all of the inhabitants of Peru. With less demand from popular organisations they tried working with different kinds of groups such as arts and communications students. However the later workshops failed to replace the organisations' lost vigor. As the workshops gradually closed down so the team got smaller and the big TAFOS family fragmented (Llosa 1996). The last 2 workshops took place in 1995. Many felt that TAFOS existed because of the workshops and should not consider functioning without them.

### **The closure of TAFOS**

Reformulating its activities, TAFOS undertook a new direction that angered many and led to much internal wrangling. The TAFOS Institute was to consist of both an NGO and an agency that would run the parallel activities of social photography workshops alongside commercial photographic activities with professionals. The objectives of the agency were to diversify dissemination and generate income to finance the organization.

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<sup>8</sup> , taken from an unauthored internal TAFOS document believed to be written by Thomas Müller around 1992



TAFOS's strategy was to become self-funded within three years and targets were being met. It was getting involved in different kinds of activities, such as the travelling exhibition 'Con Ojos de Mujer' which brought together images by 43 female photographers from all over Latin America. But then, in December 1998, Müller decided to close TAFOS's doors.

Peruvian non-profit law invests those who start an organization with the power to shut it. This is what Müller did with the following explanation,

*'The discrepancy between the investment and outcomes was getting bigger all the time. For this reason we decided in 1998 to close TAFOS' (Müller in TAFOS 2006:33)*

He expanded in an interview, "it was very expensive to run TAFOS, it was expensive as an institution, not as a movement of photographers... we had an enormous amount of administrative and organizational staff"<sup>9</sup>. Mariella Sala, the director at the time, argued that TAFOS still had committed donors who were happy with how the organization was developing. Others in the team also felt TAFOS was still doing important and relevant work.

Llosa in her accounts repeatedly refers to the TAFOS 'of before' with a certain wistfulness (1996). For many the workshops were core to the organization and they believed that without them TAFOS had lost its purpose. For Müller it was not simply a matter of reviving them. The politics had changed and it was no longer possible for the workshops to run as they were originally envisaged. For him the political urgency of the early TAFOS workshops was what gave them their power. "It was a moment and the moment had gone" (T. Müller, 2011, interview, 3 June).

### **The TAFOS archive**

TAFOS had started systemizing its archive in 1991 and it was an active component of the project's operations distributing images for use in campaigning and protesting activities. In addition to the active organisations in TAFOS, activists, academics, community leaders, journalists and sociologists all came to use the archive. When the project closed, the negatives, prints and other documents were all boxed up and stored in a warehouse until 2000 when Müller donated the full TAFOS photographic and document archive to the Faculty of Science and Arts of Communication at the highly regarded Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP), an institution with a strong social ethos, politically aligned to the left, with which TAFOS had long-standing ties.

Over the next 3 years, the university authorities organized, catalogue and archived all that had been donated<sup>10</sup>. They constructed an air-conditioned space for the conservation of the material. All the negatives were cleaned and a selection was digitalized for the web.

Consisting of some 240,000 images, the physical archive has been open to the public since 2003. Data from 2004-2011 shows that nearly half of its users are linked to

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<sup>9</sup> Colunge (2008:73)

<sup>10</sup> The archive contains more than just the TAFOS images and negatives. As well as contact sheets, work and exhibition prints, the archive holds records of promotional materials from TAFOS's exhibitions and events, the publications and media in which TAFOS has been featured and internal organizational documents: plans, evaluations and detailed research work carried out by Eleana Llosa and her team in 1995-96 which included extensive interviews with a number of the TAFOS photographers.



academia and the PUCP (Fairey 2015a). Ties to the TAFOS photographers and organisations were largely lost before the archive arrived at PUCP and the location and character of the university would make access hard for some of the far-flung communities who participated in TAFOS (E.Llosa, 2012, interview, May 17th). Other users consist of a mix of NGOs, cultural and media organisations, museums and news publications.

The TAFOS website<sup>11</sup> hosts over 8000 images and ensures that the archive is available to people beyond the university campus in Lima. 2006 saw the publication of 'País de Luz, TAFOS Talleres de Fotografía Social, Peru 1986-1998', a 192-paged hard back photographic book. 500 copies of which were donated to the national library system with the hope that the images would then be available in the communities where they were produced. A collection of 100 archival prints was donated to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2004. A specific collection of 50 digitalised images was created and made available for exhibitions within and outside of Peru. PUCP themselves have periodically arranged their own exhibitions with materials from the archive as well as organising and participating in events, talks, conferences and festivals.

When the archive was first donated to PUCP Rosa Villafuerte, TAFOS photographer and archivist, feared the whole TAFOS experience would be 'anthropoligized, reduced to material for academics and swallowed up by the bureaucracy of a big institution' (R.Villafuerte, 2012, interview, 12<sup>th</sup> May). The archive managers are keen this is not the case, and aim to keep the images alive but are hampered by limited funds (S.Pastor, 2012, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> May). Most recently a street-art exhibition took place during Peru's 2012 photography bienalle of TAFOS's photographer, Daniel Parejo's work, 'La Calle es el cielo' (The Street is the Sky) which saw TAFOS images back on the streets of Lima and being used in conjunction with educational activities and street tours.

### **TAFOS's significance as a counter archive**

To understand the value of images is to understand their vitality played out in a social context (Mitchell 2005). The TAFOS team had the foresight to recognize part of the value of what they were doing lay in the act of witnessing and of creating a visual memory for the future. The archive is central to TAFOS's ongoing legacy and significance.

Müller described the work of the TAFOS photographers "not so much a mirror (but) as a memory, authorized by the collective" (Müller in TAFOS 2006:22). In Peru, the question of collective memory is central to understanding how the country has sought to process and recuperate from the huge upheaval of the internal conflict. Images have played a central role in the unfolding conversation around truth and reconciliation (Poole and Perez 2010, Saona 2009) and TAFOS's images have come to play an active role within the wider social process looking to come to terms with and commemorate the horror and loss of those years. Used on book covers, within publications, in exhibitions and within '*Yayanapaq. To Remember*', the photographic

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<sup>11</sup> <http://facultad.pucp.edu.pe/comunicaciones/tafos/>

project of the Peru's Truth and Reconciliation commission<sup>12</sup> the TAFOS images are synonymous with the period, providing a non-official, 'priceless' account by 'the very same people who had been living through those difficult times' (S.Pastor, 2012, interview, 29<sup>th</sup> May)<sup>13</sup>. Lerner Febres, the Chair of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, sought to 'reconstruct, from the spiritual memory that the sight of images brings, that history of ours that we shouldn't forget nor abandon in oblivion' (Lerner Febres 2003). '*Yayanapaq: To Remember*' echoed the sentiment that ran through TAFOS: to recognise, to not forget, to denounce, to honour and to commemorate the strength of the common man.

Falconi, a Peruvian curator based at Harvard, talks of TAFOS as signaling an exhaustion in the traditional modes of representation. At a time when people did not trust the State, when political parties had failed to represent and defend them so people sought to do it for themselves. The TAFOS model provided a framework in which people claimed the camera as a weapon under the belief that no one can represent you except yourself (J.Falconi, 2012, interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> May).

TAFOS images splintered the minds of the left-leaning upper and middle classes, impacting the psyche of academics, intellectuals, writers, journalists and activists (T.Müller, 2011, interview, 3 June).

Falconi argues that TAFOS is

*'part of the repertoire of vernacular images that we would have in our heads. There is no more glory for a project like this than creating images that enter into peoples' heads to the point that they come part of the visual social makeup of a society. There is no better indicator of how successful the project was'* (J.Falconi, 2012, interview, 2<sup>nd</sup> May).

Research conducted with a group of former TAFOS photographers, more than 15 years after its closure, demonstrates the enduring long-term impact and influence of the project on their lives: shaping their careers, their political engagement, how they raised their children, their networks of friendships and their way of seeing the world (Faurey 2017a)<sup>14</sup>. However one of those photographers, Rosa Villafuerte, understood TAFOS's major achievement not in terms of what it enabled for individuals but in how it enabled the voices of ordinary people to be taken seriously and listened to for the first time on a public platform.

*'Few of the photographers had secondary education let alone university education. They lived in precarious economic conditions and these photographers, without being professional, made memorable images. The official sector of this country, the formal world accepted the images of these people as something valuable. This couldn't have been possible in any other way. In a society such as ours no opportunities are given to people who don't come with a reference. TAFOS was the reference that enabled these photographers who never in any other way would have had means to disseminate their images at those levels'* (R.Villafuerte, 2012, interview, 12<sup>th</sup> May).

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<sup>12</sup> see <http://www.cultura.gob.pe/es/tags/yuyanapaq>

<sup>13</sup> see Faurey 2015a for a fuller account of the TAFOS archive and how the images have been used and circulated from 2003-2011.

<sup>14</sup> A research film, *These Photos Were My Life*, consisting of interviews with former TAFOS photographers is available at <http://tiffanyfaurey.co.uk/#/these-photos-were-my-life/> (Faurey 2015b)

TAFOS is best understood as one of Kujundzic's counter-archives charged with ensuring the survival of the voices it contains. Merewether talks of the archive as the system 'that is the foundation from which history is written' (2006:10). The question that must then be asked of each archive is: whose version of history do you tell? For many who place a value on the TAFOS archive their claim is for alternative perspective on history, for the importance of a history as experienced by those outside of the traditional institutions and structures of power. TAFOS is then located as an archive that makes possible the preservation of a particular account and version of a period of Peruvian history that many feel must not be forgotten and has to stay central to the narrative and identity of Peru. It serves to disrupt and unsettle official narratives (Figure 14).

Hinojosa, a Peruvian historian argues that the archive's 'success' will not necessarily be valued today (Hinojosa quoted in Pastor 2007:6). Many on the Peruvian political right have strongly reacted against the mission of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to 'not forget', to commemorate the victims of the conflict and to arrive at a consensual understanding of the past. They dispute the version of 'truth' propagated by the Commission. The battle over memory has stirred up much hatred and political factionalism and continues to play out as the issues that drove the conflict and the legacy of war continue to shape Peruvian society. In a climate where Peru does not want to look back and seeks to demonstrate its business and commercial success, Hinojosa argues that there is limited interest in the culture and history of the indigenous communities and working classes. In this sense the significance of the TAFOS archive is yet to be fully realized. In a neo-liberal atmosphere which seeks to suppress or ignore versions of history as experienced by the working and indigenous populations it provides a pluralized version of lived grassroots history that challenges official narratives and resists the push to forget. As Derrida, pondering the archive reminds us, 'if we want to know what it will have meant, we will only know in times to come. Perhaps' (Derrida 1995:36).

What future lives that TAFOS images will have remains to be seen but the promise and hope of the archive and those who value the images is that they will continue to play a role in the visual narrative of Peru. Joyce Sallam describes as archive as a 'leap of faith' in terms of the 'belief that there will be someone to use it, that the accumulation of these histories will continue to live, that they will continue to have listeners' (in Merewether 2006:186). There is within the TAFOS images a sense of yearning for change, the hope that there will be another way and a different future. Berger questioned whether 'photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved' (1980:57). From this perspective the ongoing circulation and appropriation of the TAFOS images in contemporary interventions<sup>15</sup> and their continued availability to researchers and practitioners offer a hope of what could be as well as a record of what has past.

### **Photography as an agent of change**

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<sup>15</sup> For example see the recent street-art exhibition 'La Calle es el cielo' (The Street is the Sky) which saw TAFOS images back on the streets of Lima and being used in conjunction with educational activities and street tours.

For contemporary practitioners working with socially engaged participatory visual approaches the TAFOS experience warrants serious consideration for a number of reasons. Principally, for how TAFOS understood and located itself and photography as an agent and catalyst for change for working people.

TAFOS conceived of photography as a collective labour. It took root within the network of grassroots, localised community based initiatives that made up the thriving popular movement of the time in Peru. It was these organisations who approached TAFOS for workshops and the photographer-TAFOS-local organisation dynamic was the backbone of the whole endeavor, crucial to understanding how it was conceived, organised and managed.

TAFOS's was driven, in part, by a utopia to create a self-sustaining national movement of grassroots 'social' photographers (Llosa 1996:21). This was to be achieved through the complete transfer of workshops to the local organisations which would guarantee 'the long term continuity of the experience and its real insertion into the life of the country' (quoting from the 1991 TAFOS strategic plan). The local organisations were 'indispensable' (Llosa in TAFOS 2006:40). TAFOS was conceived as a project of 'accompaniment and support' (Pastor 2007:3) to the existing associations fighting for structural change in Peru. It understood itself to be part of a wider movement and moment rather than as an entity in and of itself.

Much of the contemporary narrative around photography mythologises the capacity of photography to empower. There is an underlying assumption that photography instigates change in and of itself but at TAFOS it was understood that it was the photographers, their organisations and the political moment that made the photography transformative not the other way round. The distinction is subtle but the shift is significant in terms of how we understand the relationship between photography and change. Photography was viewed as a tool that was being used in the service of a broader political movement for change and recognition that was driven from below rather than directed from above.

Müller believes TAFOS worked because there was a genuine demand for it. Approached countless times since by NGOs 'to do a TAFOS', he argues that practitioners are misguided in thinking they can achieve something similar without developing or ensuring they have 'what we had given to us - the interest and desire of the people to do it' (T. Müller, 2011, interview, 3 June). His remark points to the question of who should own and drive participatory initiatives. A question that remains pertinent as culture has increasingly become viewed as a resource that institutions look to harness by instigating, sponsoring and managing their own arts and culture initiatives (Yudice 2003) and in a funding environment that places a premium on participation.

TAFOS predated the contemporary focus on empowerment and did not frame its goals in those terms but there was an underlying ethos that designated the participants as already being 'empowered', that acknowledged their political capacity and potential. Paucar emphasises that TAFOS did not have any grand pretensions to have impact or change things, 'our role was to offer tools to the population so that they had the resources they needed to drive change' (JC.Paucar, 2011, interview June 5<sup>th</sup>).

People did not need empowering but rather the tools and means to further claim and realize their own empowerment. The transformational experience of the project for participants was not understood in terms that attributed this experience to the project and medium of photography itself. Rather the experience of TAFOS illustrates that how capacity and agency of participants, their organisations, networks, alliances and politics as being central to determining what a photography project can make possible.

There is humility at the core of the TAFOS ethos that contemporary practitioners can learn from as they seek to quantify and frame the social value and impact of their projects. It pushes practitioners to resist the urge to overly focus on the medium and to understand the agency of participants, partners, local contexts, political moments and movements in shaping and determining what projects achieve. There are contextual and resource constraints surrounding the empowering effects of participatory photography (Foster-Fishman et al 2005). The matter of local conditions and people's will to and capacity for change is fundamental to what is possible. Ultimately, the power of the image to enable change is all about potential rather than certainty.

The TAFOS story demonstrates the temporal character of grassroots movements and activism. The decline in the workshops and its eventual closure reveal the significance of wider political and social conditions to the viability, sustainability, reach and success of grassroots participatory movements and structures. It highlights their vulnerability. Accounts of photography often paint vibrant pictures of the medium's inherent potency however there is a danger that our grandiose aspirations bring the medium to its knees (Jay 2000). Many of these projects are immersed in a 'politics of becoming' (Connolly 2005) that is both uncertain and vulnerable because it is emergent. It is a politics that is not fully defined or established and is perceived of as a threat by dominant groups so is often suffocated or co-opted. Connolly argues that such a politics may not always be defined until after the fact when a new identity has emerged through which injuries can be measured retrospectively (1995). For this reason, it is often only in looking back that the significance of these projects and their archives are realized.

## **Conclusion**

In the story of TAFOS, the organic nature of its beginnings are often referred to (TAFOS 2006, Llosa 2006, Pastor 2007). It is important, however, to not confuse its lack of premeditation with a lack of intentionality. Those driving TAFOS were informed and motivated by a strong political conscious aligned to the popular movement of the day which was a condition without which the work of TAFOS and its workshops could not have happened (Llosa 1996). Müller places TAFOS within a genealogy of grassroots popular photography movements that includes The Workers Photography Movement of the 1920-30s. While many contemporary practitioners may not align themselves to the political ideologies that underpinned these movements, these histories and the story of TAFOS continue to be relevant. They form chapters in a 'potential history' that provides a renewed articulation of photography as a civil practice (Azoulay 2014).

The TAFOS experience illustrates both the power and limitations of photography as a tool and catalyst for social change. Photography's transformative capacity is not a given but is defined and shaped by the people and the political, social and structural circumstances in which these projects emerge and that will these images into existence and give them lives. As a pioneering experiment in grassroots visual activism and as a counter-archive of a turbulent period of Peruvian history TAFOS demonstrates the potency of photography as a tool for civil activism whilst reminding us that we must be humble in our claims for what the photography makes possible for ultimately 'the image itself cannot create a possibility that otherwise does not exist' (Campbell 2003:100).



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